**LINE FIVE: THE INTERNAL PASSPORT**

**The Soviet Jewish Oral History Project of the Women's Auxiliary**

**of the Jewish Community Centers of Chicago**

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BIRTH: 1955, near Minsk

SPOUSE: G. "P", 1946, Minsk

Married in 1973

CHILDREN: son, 1978

daughter, 1974

PARENTS: Elena D., 1919 - 1970

Mikhail P., 1913 - 1968

SIBLINGS: one sister

MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

JEWISH ORGANIZATIONAL AFFILIATIONS (IF GIVEN):

Hadassah

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Women's Auxiliary of the Jewish Community Centers of Chicago

NAME: **A. P. "P."**

DATE: May 1, 1991

INTERVIEWER: E. Snyderman

(This is May Day and we're not celebrating! Let me begin by asking you what your earliest memories are growing up in Minsk. Who lived in your home with you?) From child­hood? I was in the family. It was really nice, a really friendly family. I was the second child in my fami­ly. The difference between me and my sister is almost thirteen years. When I was born my mother was thirty-six and my father was almost forty-two. Can you imagine! It was a really special feel­ing they gave me and probably received from me too. They were really wonderful, interesting edu­cated people. Both of them.

My mother was a really strong woman and she graduated from two universities. She graduated from the university as a chemis­try teacher, and then she decided that she couldn't live without medicine, and she graduated from medical school. After this she was a really good, famous doctor in Minsk. (What kind of medicine?) She was working on the delivery of babies. She was not a gynecol­ogist. She was some special kind of physician.

It was really interesting about her life and about her work because she was one of the first doctors in Minsk who estab­lished the small department, a women's depart­ment. Maybe for America it's really strange. But in Russia it was not strange; it was painful, because a woman who has a heart problem, they couldn't deliver the baby, and it was really painful for these women. My mom, she researched a lot of things and she found out that it's possible, and she estab­lished a small hospital, maybe for only eight people, and there was a huge line of women with this problem who wanted to have a baby, and my mom followed their health from the first months of pregnancy to their delivery.

(So these are women who have a history of difficulty in the delivery of babies?) Not in delivery of babies. This woman has heart problems. (So because they had heart prob­lems...) ...they couldn't deliver a baby. Any time they were pregnant, they should abort their pregnancy, and my mom, she found out...

She couldn't have a Ph.D. in this field, she was ready to do it, but this was Russia and she was Jewish and she couldn't do it. It was really difficult for her. But her boss in this medical office was a really clever woman. She permit­ted her to have one room for eight women. She knew each woman and knew she had a heart prob­lem, and she fol­lowed this woman about her health and how she's doing a lot of things. She decided if it was possible that this woman could be pregnant and deliver a child, or not. It was really difficult for her, but she did the best. A lot of women who were able to give birth, their daughters were given my mom's name. It was really not only interesting for her, it was all her life. It was a really hard job. She was unbelievable in this.

(So I understand that 8 women were her patients?) I'm sorry, eight beds in this room. Only eight women could do it at one time. A lot of women needed it, but she didn't have the place for all the women with heart problem who wanted to have a child. In one time she can work only with eight women. Only eight. It was a very small room. In Russia it was the most important medical office in Byelorus­sia and they permit­ted her to do it. It was illegal, but she did it because she was really involved in her work and for her it was really impor­tant. And can you imagine that she graduat­ed from medical school when my sister was four years old, and it was during World War II!

(So who took care of your sister?) My mother and my grandmother. My mother had a sister. She is alive now and is a doctor too. My aunt is a wonderful woman. They were really devoted to each other ‑ my aunt and my mother. After the death of my mom, all cared about me. My mother was truly a wonder­ful woman too. They graduated medical school togeth­er. It was really hard, but it was her dream. She managed with this. She didn't graduate during World War II, it was maybe two or three years after her medical school. In Russia medical school was six years.

(What was your father's occupation?) He was the chief of a huge engineering building company. Maybe it's called something else in America. He was a building engineer. (A construction engineer?) Yes. He was really good in his occupation. In Russia for a Jewish man to have such a kind of position ‑ it was not easy. It was really his respect and everything. He was really energetic. He was older than my mom.

They had a really interesting story because he dated my mother seven years. She lived in Gomel and he lived in Minsk. Every weekend he would go from Minsk to Gomel. Then my grandmother didn't permit my mother to marry him because it was maybe some kind of reason because,... Maybe in Ameri­ca it's the same way, because my mother's family as I heard, it was a little higher level of education than the level of my father's family.

My grandfa­ther was a doctor. He graduated from St. Petersburg Universi­ty, now Leningrad University. My grand­mother was a chemistry teacher. They had really high level of education for those times before World War II. But now my mother has two brothers and one of the brothers died five years ago. He was a really good lawyer, famous in Minsk. All their family had a little higher education than the family of my father. My father had two brothers and a sister. And his family died in a ghetto during the war. The Minsk ghetto during World War II. Minsk was a really anti-­semitic city.

When the fascists came to Minsk, the first thing they did, they took some special place for Jewish people. (We call them interment camps or concentra­tion camps.) In Russian it's called the *getto*. It was a terrible place and a lot of people were killed in this ghetto.

My father was in World War II. Two of his brothers were in the war, too. His younger sister was only sixteen, and his parents and uncles and aunts, all the part of his family lived in Minsk. And just as almost any Jewish person who lived in Minsk had all this family, they were sent to the ghetto, and one day when my father came to help them to move to the forest. It was some kind of place when he was going to save them. They were killed one hour before he came. In my family it was some kind of... In my family it was some kind of... I don't know how to explain... nobody in my family has red hair, only Helen, my father's sister. I remember that my father told me it was inter­esting that only she had red hair, and now my daughter, Helen, has red hair. Life was not easy for the family.

My mother had a really interesting story about her family. Her father was a doctor. If you know, in 1937, it was a really hard time, not only for Jewish people, for a lot of educated people. Stalin sent them to the special concen­tration camps. Or they were under arrest and were in the prison. My grandfather from my mother's side, he was under arrest. Nobody knew why, nobody knew the reason. It was without any explanation. My mother's grandmother ‑ she lived with four children alone when my grandfather was in the prison. I remember the story from my grandmother. It was a really hard time. My grandmother died when she was only 47 years old. My mother was the oldest in their fami­ly. Her sister and two brothers were with her.

(Your mother's father never returned from the prison?) No, my grandfather returned from prison after his wife died. (They released him from prison after she died?) They re­leased him after prison, but he was in prison ten years. My mother told me that it was hard for them because, for exam­ple, one day in the month they can give him some kind of food, small mail. One time, the person said, "We don't know where he is. We don't know." Five or six years they didn't know where he was. And when he came home, he was really sick. He had two heart attacks in prison. He was a young man, and a wonderful man.

I remember my grandfather because when he died I was almost eleven. He lived with us, with my mother. He was a really special man. He knew a lot of things, and he told us about a lot of interesting facts, about museums, and other places of interest. He had a high level of education. He was really sick after prison. He never spoke with his grandchil­dren about prison. But after some time, I remember they closed the door and he spoke with my mother, his daugh­ter, and with his sons about it. It was really painful memories.

(So you were spared those stories?) I didn't know exactly what he felt, but I could take a guess about his feeling because it was really painful for him because it was for nothing. For nothing. (So he was released because your grandmother died?) We don't know. It was without explana­tion. My mother told every time that they are really lucky that he could go home. A lot of people couldn't do it. They had really good relationship between each other and between his grandfather, and, for example, I and my sister. We grew up in a really good, really nice, really Jewish atmosphere.

My parents were really devoted to their family. Be­cause my mother was the oldest in the family. My father was the oldest among his brothers. Can you imagine, when my father and mother were married, they lived together in one room with mother's sister, two brothers and grandfather. All of them lived together, because my father couldn't live without his brothers. He was responsible for their future. My mother did the same.

(How many people?) My parents, three from mother's side, and two from father's side. But it's really interest­ing and only now I can imagine that after my father's and mother's death, my relatives on both sides are really friendly to each other. They grew up together. They have all life together, and all our children, their grandchil­dren. It was one huge family that celebrated together. Now, for example, there are some sad days for my mother's and father's deaths. All the relatives and their children and their grandchildren and their in‑laws and everybody, we went to the cemetery, it was memory day. It was nice.

(You observed the Jewish anniversary of their deaths and you went to the cemetery. What other Jewish traditions were you observing? You said that you were raised with the feeling of Jewishness?) We felt Jewishness because my father had a really good position in Russia, and my mother was a really good physician. My father went to Jewish school before World War II. He knew Yiddish really well. My mother didn't know anything, but she understood. Some­times when they wanted to hide something from us, my father spoke Yiddish, my mother answered in Russian. We understood everything! When I was maybe three or four years old, he said, "We're speaking Chinese."

But the Jewish atmosphere I felt from another side. My father was really a man of action, not a calm man. I could never remember him to sit to watch tv ‑ never. All the time he was really involved in doing all kinds of business. I remember this and maybe five times I talked to my children about it. Maybe the reason isn't only that his parents were in the ghetto ‑ it was maybe another reason from their feeling. A lot of Jewish people were killed in Minsk. The Byelorussian government didn't permit them to put a monument in Minsk devoted to the people who were killed in the ghet­to. They told them, "Okay, you can do it, but only with your money and your skills. We didn't give you any money."

And my father, he was a boss, and he was really im­pressed after this, and he decided Okay. We created a committee and collected money from people, and it was proba­bly... I was lucky, because I grew up in a really interest­ing atmosphere. A lot of people came from different cities and places in Byelorus­sia. They came to our home and brought the money. If he could bring ten rubles, it was Okay. If it he could bring 10,000 rubles, it was Okay too. My father kept track of every person who came, in this book. He kept a lot of cards and told people about it. It was really a huge dream of people who came to our house and who brought money. My uncles and aunts ‑ everybody was involved in this. We children were involved too because we didn't have an answering machine and we didn't have any automatic equipment, and we put down every person who called us and who wanted to bring money or wanted to send money. It was really a special feeling. We collected money, and they put a monument. It was really beautiful. It was not huge, a small monument. And these people were killed in, how to explain, not in the plain ground. It was some kind of lake, but without water. (Like a river bed?) Yes, like a river bed. It was dry, but not in the same level as the ground. They decided to keep everything as it was here. They put a monument in this place, exactly in this place where the Minsk ghetto was. It was really exciting for us, not only for my parents, but it seems to me for all Jewish people were there on this day.

(What was this monument made of?) It was made from a special kind of stone. It was not a really expensive stone, but it was beautiful. Beautiful words were written on this monument. There were a lot of flowers. I remember that it was like a tradition to come to this monument. It was the day of Victory in Russia, only one or two days where we could hear the Jewish songs and music, and now when we became father and mother, we went every May 9 to this monu­ment. It was not Jewish music, only Russian songs, but when I was with my father, it was only Jewish music. I thought that my parents were waiting for this day. I thought that it was maybe the most important holiday in their life ‑ when people in Russia celebrated the seventh of October, the first of May. My father said that those weren't holidays for us. We have only one holiday ‑ the ninth of May. Because we couldn't celebrate Passover, Yom Kippur or Rosh Hashona. No. I knew a little bit about it, but we didn't celebrate.

My mother, during Passover, maybe she cooked some special food, but it was not special dishes. We had matzos at every Passover, but my parents hid it. They couldn't permit me to bring matzos to school. One day I did it and my mother was so upset! [laughs] There were Russian cus­toms, and they adapt to this. But for this day, I remember that it was really a huge great holiday. (This holiday was just for your family?) No, this is a holiday for all Rus­sian people. The day of Russians mourning World War II.

(So that was a celebra­tion...) My father told me, "They celebrate one victory. We celebrate the memory of our Jewish people." It was maybe the same day, but for us it was really special. It was the day when the monument was estab­lished. It was the day when at nine o'clock usually there was a meeting at this place and there were special events. I grew up and was involved with this as a child. It was a really interesting life I had because my father was very active, and my mother was involved in this part of life and she was really devoted to her job. A lot of women called her any time of the day or night. The doors of our house were open at all times for people. They were really a special kind of people and another point which I should remember about my life ‑ they were really close to each other. Sometimes it was some kind of jealousy for me be­cause... Maybe this is some kind of special feeling because my father was a little simpler than my mother. He was really kind and nice and open to people. He could give people a holiday, not only on special occasions, but any day for him was a holiday. For example, he would go home after his job with a huge bouquet of flowers for my mother, with­out any reason! And sometimes if the day was not good.. but he took her a lot of flowers. (He picked them or bought them at a store?) Not at a store. He needed to go to the special place where people sold flowers, a flower market. The price was so high, but it was never a problem for him, because he wanted to do something pleasant for my mom.

I remember other things, we had vacation with my mom in Riga, Latvia. On July 22 is the day of their wedding. And my father sent a really beautiful card to my mother with congrat­ulations, and I kept all of this. I brought it here. It was maybe only my memories that I have. My mom was happy and we celebrated this. Suddenly we were at the beach ‑ it was so hot ‑ and I saw my father in the dark suit. He flew to Riga with some kind of cans. In these cans were maybe 25 or 30 roses. He wanted to do something really special for her. Their whole life they were really good to each other.

My father died really suddenly. My mother was sick. She had cancer when she was 47 years old. It was really suddenly for her too. She was working in the medical of­fice. She got a test many times during the year. One day when she got the test, they told her that she had cancer. She was a really strong woman. She was operated on. The operation was really good. They extracted all the cancer. (Was it uterine cancer?) Yes. It was ‑ I don't know now how it was ‑ but during this time the doctors explained to my father and my aunt. Almost everything was okay. She started to recover and felt good, she had a good mood. I had never seen her cry. But during this time when my mother was in the hospital my father got grey hair instead of black. He was so upset. He hid it from me and my sister. It seemed like no one could come. After her operation, he lived only five months. During one of his meetings, he [died...?] He was only 56 years old. He never had any heart problems ‑ ever. But he had not an easy life too. Because he lost his parents in such a terrible way. He went through the whole war as a military officer ‑ five years. After this, he came to Minsk and was involved in some mili­tary business. During this business he was under arrest almost two years too.

I don't know the reason. Nobody told me about it. I knew from my aunt. It was a terrible time for my parents because one day my father didn't come home. He wasn't at home almost two years. Then after two years he was in freedom. Nobody explained to him why he was in prison two years. (He didn't have a trial?) Never a trial. It was some kind of years. It was 1949 ‑ 1952. It was the deal with the Jewish doctors. During this time my mother had a really terrible time.

She explained to me that it was a crazy time. She was working as a doctor, and she told me, "Can you imagine that people didn't visit me because I was Jewish and they were afraid that if I'm Jewish I might kill or poison them?" It was really the official way in Russia. All the newspapers said that Jewish doctors wanted to kill Russian people, to kill Stalin. The propaganda in Russia was so terrible. Almost two or three years it was a terrible time for doc­tors. She couldn't work.

(The Doctors' Plot ‑ that trial was in 1952. And your father was already in prison by then?) He came home in 1953. (So 1951‑1953. Was she able to have any contact with him while he was in prison?) Yes, my relatives could con­tact him. It was a really critical time for my parents because my grandfather was sick and my aunt and uncle were in China at this time because my uncle was a military offi­cer, and my mother was really close to her sister. She was without her sister and without my father and my sister was almost nine years old. Her father was sick. And my aunt from China sent us all her salary every month to help my mother. But they kept a good mood and could manage through this time.

(And it was before you were born and it's such an important part of your memory of your family history...) Yes. (You've given me a picture not only of family life when you were very small, but before you came on the scene at all. Do you remember hearing political discussions in your home?) Yes, a lot of political discussions, because my uncle was a lawyer. He was involved in a lot of processes of political things and he discussed them with my parents. And my uncle from my father's side was a military officer. He graduated from the military academy in Leningrad. The level of discussion in my family was really high, as I remember. It was not only discussion about food, about clothes.

(What did you under­stand as a child? How old were you?) I was six ‑ ten ‑ eleven. (What do you remember them talking about? When you were six, in the early Sixties, Solzhenitsy­n's book was published.) Of course. They had a lot of discussions about this. My parents had a really good library at home. My mother was really involved in collect­ing books. They read a lot. We had the Solzhenitsyn book at home. When I grew up I understood everything, but when I was a child I listened to a lot about this, but they didn't permit me to read this because I was really young. But they talked to my sister about it.

I remember another book. The author was Dyakov. About people who were in prison during 1937 and 1952. This book was called The Memory about Life. It was a really wonderful book. I kept it and I remember when my parents read this book, my mother almost cried because the whole time... Now I under­stand it. She could probably imagine what her father did in this camp. It was terrible. This was my parents' life. They understood a lot about political things. During this time it was Solzhenitsyn, Dyakov. It was some kind stuff that was not permitted to be published. (*Samizdat?*) Yes, *samizdat*. (They were typed manuscripts?) Yes, yes. My parents read a lot of things and we had at home a lot of things. In Russia the author Kuznetsov ‑ he was the first who wrote about Jewish people who were killed. It was Yama ‑ people killed during World War II close to Kiev. And Evgeny Yevtushenko wrote some really wonderful poems about it. It was forbidden to print it too. My parents kept it at home. (Baba Yar?) Yes, you're right. They were so excited about it. I remember my father decided to write letters to Yevtushenko to thank him about this poem.

(Did you ever hear your parents talk about leaving Russia?) It was some kind of special discussion in my family, too, because some relatives of my father... By the way, I wanted to find them, because every time my uncle wrote me that they are wonderful people. They left Russia before World War II. It was then my father's uncle with all his family, sons and daughters. But my parents ‑ I don't know how to explain. (Did they go to Israel?) No, to America. To New York. I couldn't find them, and I stopped doing it. Every time my uncle asks me to do it because he wants me to find those connections.

(Have you run an ad in the newspaper?) No. (You could do that.) They didn't speak about leaving Russia. Maybe they have a lot of relatives. For my parents it was impos­sible to live without their relatives, because both of them were really devoted to their relatives. All the negative side of Russian life, they spoke about it a lot. But they understood that some of my relatives would not leave, be­cause my uncle from my mother's side, he was married to a Russian woman. It was so sad for my parents. But probably they were some kind of special people. Maybe I can't take them as guilty because they probably taught me to be really Jewish, both of them. Maybe they spoke to each other, but never with us, with me or my sister.

(When you went to school, you weren't thinking you might be able to leave this country?) I don't know. I was never "a Russian girl" because I knew from my childhood that I am Jewish. My parents respect this, they didn't hide it. A lot of Jewish people should do it, because life for Jewish children was not easy. They changed nationality, they changed last name. It was some kind of trick, but they did it. My parents never did it. They never spoke about it. For example, once I came home from school and somebody told me some bad words about Jews and I cried, and my father told me, "You shouldn't cry, you should be proud." When I was in school, there were maybe seven or eight children from Jewish families in my class. We were really close to each other.

In all my life, nobody told me, but I knew that I should marry only a Jew. It's probably from the family. I don't remember if my mom spoke with me about it, but I knew exactly. I had a lot of Russian children for friends, but all my close friends, people with whom I can discuss every­thing, they're Jewish. It was some kind of special communi­ty among my parents. Almost all their friends were Jewish. Sometimes they sang a lot of Jewish songs at home. Some­times a holi­day... (Were they Hebrew?) No, only Yiddish. They didn't know Hebrew. They had mixed friends too. Maybe these were the friends my father had during World War II. Maybe from this point.

But for me, I don't know, when I was in the ninth grade, my mother was alive. It was maybe the last year or last month of her life. We spoke with her in the hospital. I dreamed about being a doctor. And my mother told me, "You can't do it. You can't do it because it's impossible now in Russia to enter medical school. You shouldn't dream about it. You should go to a technical college." It's the only way for Jewish children ‑ because the technical college has only the written exam. All the other universities have the oral exam. And when you have oral exams, they know you are Jewish. But when you take the written exam, they don't know who you are because you have only the number. You put the number on this sheet of paper and that's it. (So it's an anonymous test?) Yes. This is the reason why almost all people who came from Russia are engineers or computer scien­tists.

(Is this also the reason why we don't hear anything about Jewish lawyers?) Yes, because if you would like to be a lawyer you have to graduate from the university, the special kind in Russia, and it's only oral exam. That was the reason. When I was in school I came to some kind of preparing school for medical school. I graduated with two years of school. The whole time my mom spoke with me she said, "I know it's your dream but you should forget about it." Forget, because as we did in school with this gold medal.... So I went to the polytechnical university. It was boring for me, but I didn't have another chance to do it. It's probably sometimes it seems to me that I endured it, it was not close to me, I hate all this engineering stuff. I started really easy. (It came easy to you?) Yes, really easy to me, but I hated this. And now, with my daughter, she's going to be a doctor. It's only that which I couldn't do.

(What was the percentage of Jews in the school when you were growing up?) Maybe close to 10%. Not much, but it was not so bad for me because I graduated from a good school. We lived in a really good district with a lot of Jewish people. In Russia it was almost the same, the district where almost all Jewish people lived, maybe some blue‑collar people lived. My parents had a really good apartment, not a house. With this apartment are my really sad memories too, because our apartment was really good for Russia, because my mother had really good taste. Everything was nice. They had a good library.

When both of them died, the second day, after the ceremony, the people from the Soviet government came to my apartment and told me that I should leave this apartment because it's really huge for me. I am alone, and I need to leave this apartment and they can give me a one‑bedroom apartment in another district. (How big was this apart­ment?) It was a three room apartment ‑ not three bedrooms, one bedroom for my parents, one for me, and library with bedroom, a huge reading room. It was a cozy apartment. It was not our own apartment. We pay, but all apartments in Russia are rented apartments. But it's not rent like in America. When the government gives you an apartment, you can live in this apartment how long you want to live.

(How long had your family lived there?) My family lived in this apartment since when I was born. I was born in another apartment, and after two months, they moved to this apartment. It was their first apartment in their common life. All the time they had lived with my mother's or father's side. It was the first time in their life where they could live with me and my sister. When my sister was married, she lived with the mother of my brother‑in‑law. It was really a terrible feeling because after my parents died they came into my apartment and rummaged through my rooms. I was so depressed. Nobody looked at my face. They were not interested in what I am doing. They decided only one thing, because one really huge boss wanted to have our apartment. For him, it doesn't matter what I think, what my relatives think. One of my teachers was so impressed after this that she came to this boss and said, "How can you do it?" And he told her it was none of her business. They pushed us and called us every day.

(Where was your sister?) With her family. She had a six‑­year‑old son. All the time he stayed with us, with my parents. My mother and father loved their grandson so much that he lived with us. I grew up with him almost. My sister lived with her mother‑in‑law who was really sick. She was paralyzed and my sister lived with her in their apartment and I lived in this apartment with my parents. After the death of my parents, it was a terrible time for us because it looked like some kind of [...] and people called and they came to our apartment. They did such terrible stuff. My relatives decided that there was only one way to keep this apartment. It was the memory of my parents. We decided to take some kind of compromise with the Soviet government. At this time my sister's mother‑in‑law died. My sister went to one of the Soviet offices and she said to give them her apartment, and for her to move into my apart­ment. It was the only one way to keep our apartment.

This man who wanted to live in our apartment, he was our neighbor for ten years. He knew my father and he shook his hand every morning. And only when he died, he decided to kick me out. (Was he Jewish?) No! He was not Jewish. It was a terrible story.

I lived with my sister. My aunt wanted to live near us. My sister is a wonderful woman. We were close. I helped her to come here. But my aunt, she's a special woman, and she decided that probably she can give me much more than my sister. She has two sons almost my age and we were close to each other growing up. And I moved to her apartment. I went back and forth. My uncle wanted me to live with him, from my father's side. It was nice, because everybody wanted to participate in my life, to be involved in my life, not to be separate from me.

(What was going on in your mind through all of this? You lost both your parents? You did feel protected to some extent...) For me it was a really terrible feeling because, for example, to lose the parents is for everybody difficult. It's some kind of emptiness in your life. But for me it was really special because my parents were unusual people. Their life was really unusual. I saw the type of my class­mates, and it was different, a really different life. My parents were really special people. I remember, for exam­ple, at the funeral of my father, and not only his company closed but a lot of companies closed because of his death. In Russia it was forbidden ‑ in America it may be possible, but in Russia it was forbid­den ‑ and these people came to the funeral. He was some kind of really unusual man, and my mother was too. For me it was a really empty part and I was really depressed. I didn't want to go to school. I decided to interrupt my education. I didn't know what to do.

Probably my aunt, she was really one person who not only was concerned for me ‑ everybody was ‑ but she had some kind of special influence over me. She didn't cry to me. She didn't speak to me with a lot of conversations, "You should go to school.." etc., she found some kind of way to my soul. I love her. She is an interesting woman too. She's working in a children's hospital. She's a pediatri­cian. A hospital where children are without parents. She was working at this place from 1949. She was the chief of this place. If you're in Russia and want to live without children you can leave them in at the delivery house, and then the children are in this special kind of place.

(We would call that an orphanage.) Yes, but these children are not orphans, because they have parents, just parents who don't want to deal with the children. Young mothers, mixed things. It was a terrible place. But we grew up with this place because all our children's stuff, our clothes, my aunt brought to this place. Because the govern­ment doesn't give a lot of money to these children. They help them, it's true, but it was not huge help. I remember how my aunt's pockets were all full of candy. When she came to the job she brought candy and would give candy to these children. (How long did the children stay in this place?) Until three years. And after three years they go to another special place. But this place was after they were born until three years old.

(How many children lived there?) It wasn't just one place. When I was a youngster it was only one place. Now my aunt wrote my that it was five places. In this place are three hundred children. Helen has an essay about it because she was working for this place. When she was six and seven and eight, this is some kind of special education for me and for Helen too. My aunt brought us to this place and we were brought to these children. In the summertime they have a country village where children can spend the summertime, and we were in this place in the summertime. Probably she had for me, maybe has a really important part of my life.

(She's not going to leave is she?) I don't know. I applied for her, but it's really hard for me and for her. We are not in the close relationship on the paper. She's my aunt. I was her niece. But in American embassy is the requirement that we should be mother, sister, brother, daughter, this kind of relationship. I applied for her and wrote the letter to the American embassy that she may be closer to me than some others to their children. But now it doesn't work. On Monday I called Washington, and she does­n't have a case number yet. (I'm surprised that she would want to leave at her age, but she must feel so close to you...) Not only close to me. She has children, she has two sons and she understands that they can't live in Russia right now. (So if she comes her sons will come too.) Of course, all of her children. I am really close with them. It was a really terrible time when I was going to leave Russia.

(Your family is really interesting for many reasons, not only because of your immediate strong and devoted fami­ly, but because the extended family is very connected.) Can you imagine that in America I'm all alone ‑ away from all my family in Russia, and for me it is the most painful part of my life in America. I enjoy this life. I appreciate this life, because I had some terrible experiences in Russia. Not only me and my family. Maybe my husband told you ‑ we lived ten years as refugees in Russia. (As refuseniks. Let's talk a little bit about your schooling, how you met..)

(So your parents are gone and your aunt, etc. are all helping you out. You must have been something of an inde­pen­dent girl anyway...) Yes. I entered the polytechnical university, and in the second year I was married. I was married when I was eighteen. It was not easy for me too, because I decided when I got pregnant to continue studying and so Helen was born. It was a really hard time for us, but we managed! And when Helen was four and a half and Michael was born, we decided to leave Russia. It was not only my decision ‑ it was G.'s decision too. But I was the first to make these decisions. Through my short experi­ence in my life, people fought with my apartment. My feel­ing, nobody wanted to think about me and a lot of things which I brought from my father's experience. My mother sometimes called me a Zionist at home. I don't know why. In Russia maybe it was some kind of stream of young Jewish children. Sometimes we had some meetings. I didn't tell my mother about it. I had some friends and they were really involved in Jewish life. For me it was so interesting.

When I was married, he probably told you some bad things that happened with his research because he's really smart in all kinds of engineering business and he couldn't do anything. Maybe I was really angry because when I start­ed to work I understood that I hated that job and I was really angry with everyone in my country that I couldn't go to the medical school. It was my dream. A lot of reasons, and we decided to leave Russia. Then we got a negative answer, and for ten years our life was really difficult. I lost my job. Gena lost his job. We had two children. We couldn't feed them. We couldn't pay for anything. It was a terrible life. Gena got two jobs. He translated some technical articles. I tried to find a job but I couldn't because the whole time people called OVIR and OVIR told them, "She wants to leave Russia..." and I couldn't find work. Two years I was without a job.

One man, he was my classmate, he helped me. He was half‑Jew­ish. His father was Jewish, his mother not. He helped me to find a job. I was really happy with my job. It was interest­ing, close to my engineering experience. Probably I had luck in meeting people. The people in my job were really wonderful. It was some kind of experience too ‑ not all people were wonderful. I met a lot of good people. My boss at this company was a really good man and he looked at the business side ‑ not, "Are you Jewish? Go away." He was not this kind of man. He made me the chief of a small department. When I decided to leave Russia at this time I went to his office and I told him about this. He told me, "I knew it ‑ I was only waiting to know when you'd do it!"

(You were considered refuseniks, right?) Yes. (Were you able to maintain any contact with other refuseniks?) I'll tell you the truth. We didn't do it. We had our really close friends. Now they live in New Jersey; we left Russia togeth­er. We did everything together. We were refuseniks on the same day. It was maybe ‑ we had other friends. We couldn't do it because Michael was already two months when we got refusenik status. We needed to leave because we didn't have anything. When we were going to leave Russia we sold every­thing. We left in the empty apartment only one thing which I didn't sell ‑ that was my parents' library. I don't know why ‑ it was really big money. It was my only big money and I didn't sell it. Maybe I had some kind of feeling, I don't know. When people came to my apartment to buy something, everybody was im­pressed. "Oh, I want to buy that." And every time I told them, "No, I'll do it a little later."

We lived in an empty apartment. We didn't have any beds, any chairs ‑ anything. (What happened to the li­brary?) We sold the library in this time. It was not all sold. Most of these books I left with my sister, or I presented them as gifts to my close friends. It was the memory of my parents, and our library was excellent. Be­cause my mother had really good taste, and loved to read. She collected not only books by their covers and famous writers ‑ no, she collected books as she wanted to have and to read and that she loved. (It reflected her taste?) Yes.

(What were some of the titles and authors?) For exam­ple, everybody in my family loved the German Jewish writer [Leon Viktuandev]. We had Shulamalexov. My mother loved some Russian classics like Chekhov, Tolstoy. We had a lot of others including the French, Balzac; the American, Irwin Shaw. It was a great library, really good taste. Some of these books were left her from her father's side. I could­n't send them to America. I brought some of them, maybe five or six books.

(We didn't talk about the institute where you became a student. How old were you when you started there?) I was sixteen. It wasn't fun for me. I hated to study engineer­ing, but I had to do it. I graduated with a "red diploma" ‑ it means all "A's". It came easy to me, but in my group, I was the only Jewish girl. It was 45 people, only two girls, and I the only Jewish girl. But during all times in Byelo­russia the institute was the only place Jews could enter. It was not a really bad atmosphere in this university. But from year to year it got worse and worse. It was not good from the educational side.

When Gena started there it was the high level ‑ a lot of Jewish professors. Then the Jewish profes­sors couldn't come here. In Russia, if you are a professor, every five years you should apply for these positions. And when these years are finished, almost all Jewish professors were not selected for these positions. So from year to year, the technical univer­sity lost the Jewish professors and teach­ers. And the president of this university was changed. [The new one] was really anti‑semitic. Gena studied with his son. In my life, maybe I was married and had a family. These years for me were not remarkable for me in my life. Because it was not school where I wanted to be; it was not the level of education of which I had dreamed. I had a family, I had other business. I had really good, close friends. We had good people around us and some other kind of life, so school didn't impress me.

(How did you meet G.?) I met G. at the wedding of my friend. I was invited from one side. He was invited from another side. And we met each other and he was already studying and I had just entered this university. (You're about nine years apart?) Yes. He had his Ph.D. in this time when I met him. (I don't have that down here.) Yes, he got his Ph.D. when he was twenty‑five. From the same place.

(How long did you know each other before you got mar­ried?) Two months. (Love at first sight?) Yes, maybe! [laughs] Maybe it was some kind of special occasion, be­cause I was alone, I don't know exactly. But it was really quickly. I continued to study, and Gena continued to work. It was not really interesting in our inside life, because when we got married we started to think about some kind of Russian's life and probably we had really interesting peo­ple, and all our discussions were about negative events in Russian life, about Jewish. We read a lot of Jewish books. Gena had a really interesting grandfather. He knew Hebrew and Yiddish. While he was alive he spoke with us. Maybe he was the first man from whom I heard that [he] wanted to leave Russia. Because we didn't have children at this time. He was a really clever man. In our circle of friends, all the time we talked about it. Maybe our life pushed us to do it.

(So your marriage, instead of being a period where you could just be romantic and pursue material improvement in your life, this was when you became more politically in­tense?) Yes, more politically intense because from my family, from my childhood, school, friends. All events pushed me to think about it. Maybe all our life made us do it, because it wasn't an easy life. Instead of enjoying our life, for example to spend some time on vacation, we never had enough money. Sometimes we couldn't buy a book that we would like to have because it was really expensive for us. Small kind of things, but sometimes we feel that we've spent our life standing in line to buy this, to buy this, and we lose something. We couldn't do what we wanted to do, and Gena had a really serious problem in his job ‑ not with the job, but with people. He understood that he could do a lot of useful things, and he had a lot of articles from inter­esting re­search. For example, he came to his boss and said, "I've invented something." "Why? I don't ask you to do it?"

(There was no reward for this energy and intelli­gence...) Yes. We explained our feelings, to our closest friends yes, but to people around us, it was not interesting for them. When we started to think about it, we read a lot of articles, a lot of books. It was really insulting for us. It's all lies from our government, from our system. People were afraid to say something important. And we understood these people, because that was life in Russia. Sometimes I felt that not only couldn't they say something truly, they couldn't think about it truly because almost all people were two people. One person was outside and another person was inside. It was really difficult for us.

Another point that really insulted me was that the monument of my parents was ruined. When the first family from Minsk started to leave Minsk and to go to America or Israel, it was not a Jewish cemetery. It was the cemetery where Jewish and non‑Jewish people were buried. But it was the Jewish part of this cemetery. One day I came to this place to put flowers and I was in a state of shock. The monument of my parents was ruined. (What did it look like?) I have a picture. On this monument was a picture of my mother and father. The portrait was broken with a huge stone. It was terrible. When I came home I was in shock. I thought never do I want to be in this country ‑ never. (What year was this?) It was after my marriage ‑ 1975, 1976. When there was a stream of people going to Israel. Not only my parents', but a lot of monuments around them were broken. It was terrible to look at. We had another recent experience with our cemetery because we put some flowers in this monument in the ground. They were beautiful red flowers. I remember this. It cost me all my month's salary. I bought them in the one farm ‑ it was really far from Minsk and we didn't have a car. I took them by bus. I was excited and happy. We went with Gena on a Saturday to put the flowering plants in the ground and I came on Sunday to water them and there were no flowers in the ground. I don't know who did it. Nobody knew who did it. (Was it the only grave that was damaged?) Not the only one. (So there was vandalism. Was it the first time you were aware of vandalism in the Jewish cemetery?) In my life, yes. Maybe in my parents' it was not the first. But in my life it was a big impression for me. Because I gave it all my life and soul and it was so beautiful. We spent a whole day putting it in the ground and watering it. It was terrible. It was nothing.

(You're married a short time and expecting your baby?) Yes. (So how long after that were you refused?) We got refused in 1980. We left Russia in 1989. It was nine years of difficult experiences. We married in 1973.

(What was it like in those days when Helen was born. Did you go to the hospital?) Yes. I went to the hospital, my mother's hospital, and everybody knew me in this hospital from my childhood. (So you had good care?) For Russia it was really good care, but for America I understand it's not really good care. Because in the one room there were seven women. It was not clean, it was not good. I lost a lot of blood because no one was in the recovery room. But my aunt called a lot of people because they grew up with me. She knew a lot of the doctors. They came and helped me. With me everything was Okay. I had some problems after Helen's birth. She had some problems with her legs. Almost one year her legs were in casts. But with the help of my aunt and husband I could manage with this. So I didn't interrupt my study and I studied all this time. It was very interest­ing. I delivered Helen on the 7th of December, and on the 2nd of January I was in the institute! I took the test!

(Who took care of her?) We hired one of our neighbors. She was an old, really kind woman. We paid her almost half of G.'s salary, and I didn't have any salary ‑ I was a student! On the financial side it was so hard for us. I didn't want to interrupt my study. (How long did you go to school after that?) Three and a half years. (Did you have to write a thesis for your M.A. degree?) No. I did college and my Master's degree together. I got my diploma. When Helen was one year old, she went to the [daycare.] It wasn't expen­sive, only $12 a month. It was not good, I understand right now, but for such a time for me it was really useful. And sometimes Helen was sick, because can you imagine 35‑40 children together, and they eat, sleep and play together, so none of them are healthy because of this.

(I know you went through a lot, the years of refusal. Who sponsored you?) We had our friends here and they were our sponsors. We didn't have any relatives here. We had some friends, and some live in Pittsburgh, and other close friends live in New York. It was an interesting fact too, they were not our close friend, but G., ‑ I don't know why he wanted to go to Chicago. It was a choice between New York and Chicago, and he asked me to go to Chicago. Because I really wanted to go to New York because they were really our close friends. I continued to write them from Russia. But G. in Russia went to the library and he found out that a lot of com­panies... because for him to work it was really important... and he found a lot of companies that were relat­ed to his field. He said we needed to go to Chicago ‑ that only in Chicago could he find a job. So we came to Chicago.

(Were there surprises here in Chicago?) Yes. It was really a shock for us. There were a lot of impressions, a lot of feelings. First of all, it was really difficult. We came here without almost any people we knew here in Chicago. People helped us a lot, but some kind of life, some kind of people. Sometimes it seems to me that I lost almost every­thing ‑ my family, my relationship in the family. A lot of things we need to do ‑ find a job, help ourselves, our children, find an apartment. Everything was new for us. A new experience to make a social security number, to write a resume. In Russia we never wrote resumes. We found a job another way. For us every day we got a lot of things to do.

But maybe our hard life in Russia prepared us for this life, because we knew how to work. We knew how to feel strong and not be upset on small occasions. We understand what's really important for us and what's not important. And people. I told you I have really good luck with people here. We met a lot of really wonderful people ‑ I don't mean just Russians, but American people who really helped us a lot ‑ by advice, really good help.

(Was this through the various Jewish agencies?) I appreciate everything given to us. Because we only came this way. It's really a big deal, an important part of our life. But maybe the time when we came, a lot of people came. They didn't have a lot of money or a lot of time to help us. They paid for us for six months and it was really important because without this we couldn't find a job, we couldn't do anything. But Jewish American people helped us much more than the Jewish community itself.

(How did you meet these people?) One family, Martha and Bruce Hofstader in Highland Park. He's a dentist. And they called us one day and suggested their help. They're really wonderful people. And from Jewish Vocational Service they sent us [...] an unbelievable woman. We met another wonderful woman, [...] she was our teacher of English, Sheryl Coffman. On one occasion we met an interesting woman, a professor at Northwestern University, Mara Adelman, she's a remarkable woman too. And until now, all the time I feel that if I need advice to decide something, I can call them any time and I'll get a really good, full answers, without any questions "Why do you do this..." They under­stand us.

Maybe one year ago I met Elaine Cantor, a member of Hadassah, and she's really friendly to us. Now that Helen's applying to college she and her husband called and asked and gave advice. It was really important for us because we don't have any experience in this life. It's really appre­ciated for us because maybe in Russia we lived most of our life and we had close friends, but never people who didn't know you to help you ‑ only your close friends and rela­tives. And when we came here without any kind of connec­tions, people wanted to help us. Maybe they appreciate our hard life. R... often told me, "I can't imagine it." Maybe it's true.